

The Vicious Cycle: geek identity politics

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Geeky media, namely video games, have been historically associated with a young, white, male consumer base. Studies show that this demographic is no longer the primary consumer of nerdy media, especially as niche genres like fantasy and science fiction continue to become mainstream. However, marketing efforts and the associated industries still create games, film, and comics with the white, male audience in mind. The stereotypical geek identity has been maintained through this and gatekeeping practices within the community that create a hostile environment from perceived outsiders: women. The stagnation of the geek identity is due in part to this pushback from the community, which blocks women's access to the industry itself, which then leads to the lack of female character representation in geeky media making women and girls all the less likely to pursue careers in said media. This thesis examines these gatekeeping tactics and why the gamer or geek identity continues to be perceived as white and male despite evidence suggesting the geek identity is significantly more nebulous than said narrow demographic.

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Process Analysis Statement

This thesis started as a creative project based on a creative project that has led me to three years of studying women and other oppressed groups in the sometimes toxically masculine, heteronormative, and overwhelmingly white world of geek media. The Coven podcast is published through the Unified Media Lab's entertainment, tech, and pop culture publication Byte. I started the podcast in my sophomore year with the aim to discuss in an entertaining and informative way about the representation of women, people of color, and the LGBT+ community in media. This is because in my view, diverse representation is typically lacking, or worse, inaccurate to an offensive level. On The Coven, I would host discussions on this between myself and two other guests, going over a range of topics such as Men's Rights Activists, whitewashing in Hollywood, #Gamergate, and the fetishization of gay men by women.

Much of the time what these conversations—often an hour in length—boiled down to was that media doesn't reflect reality, but people expect it to. Through this, harmful stereotypes are maintained and unfounded prejudice affirmed. Responsible writing and research toward accurate representation is important. Chiefly, including diverse voices in the production process of said media is key to creating positive representation. And on The Coven, there were many moments when we were able to praise strides toward positive representation, like *Sesame Street*'s inclusion of a character with Asperger's Syndrome.

Originally, the idea behind this creative project was to do a sort of episode of The Coven: I would include my voice narrating the research I put into each episode with a video featuring motion graphics of the topic at hand.

In the end, I kept the infographics, but scrapped the video.

The core of this thesis is centered around geeky media (video games, comics, film, television, etc.) because that's where my area of interest is, but also where I feel that anyone outside of straight, white, men's presence is questioned. Video games especially have been historically marketed toward this demographic, despite half of players today being women. The gaming community is rife instances of discrimination; racial slurs used in chat, online witch hunts like #Gamergate, and a hyper-masculine culture of gatekeeping. But I love video games. I know many other women, people of color, and those in the LGBT+ community who love video games, sidestepping the brunt of online abuse targeted at them.

Initially, my net was cast wide. I had intended on examining instances of exclusion and prejudice for the geek community perpetrated against women, people of color, and the LGBT+ community. However, this broad topic proved to be too expansive for me to write and research for a single paper. I chose instead to write what I knew as a woman who claims the geek identity, although further research into how people of color—namely black women—and the LGBT+ community have come into their own in the gaming community despite the notorious racism and homophobia that runs rampant in geek communities.

Renee advised me to start writing, and things would narrow from there. The project itself had narrowed from a script for a video, to a written thesis with infographics, to a shorter thesis embedded in a nicely designed webpage with said infographics. When it came time for writing, I had a lot of ideas over a lot of subject matter. I wanted to talk about the history of video games, esports, hateful memes, the tropes female characters often fall into, not to mention their disproportionately sexualized avatars in games or their outright exclusion from triple-A titles, and #Gamergate and gatekeeping and the advent of the neckbeard: believer in women as simultaneously unattainable, exotic objects and as cruel, malicious temptresses who hate men

who like video games. In the end, as I started to write, having mapped out what my progress should be throughout the semester, I went from having six sections of my thesis, to three in the body. The introduction and conclusion stayed relatively the same throughout my progress, and served as the compass for the tone that I took on in writing.

The content of the writing itself evolved from purely scholarly, my only sources being from academic, peer-reviewed papers, to including articles from online publications, and thus my writing being marginally more glib. *The Vicious Cycle* reads as a long form version of what I was used to writing during my time writing features for Byte, with an academic slant. And with illustrations, which came last of all in my process. Not wanting to distract from the writing, I went with a simple color scheme that reflected the gender bias my paper discussed when I edited the infographics in Photoshop. Inspired by layouts I had seen on Pinterest, I built several snippets of stats and information, embedding them in the appropriate places within my thesis, before stitching them together for a final infographic.

The inclusion of infographics to reflect my work as a graphic designer throughout my time at Ball State weren't the only reason why I chose to make this project a creative one rather than the traditional thesis I had briefly pondered between the video idea and this one. I admire magazine spreads and online publications that make their articles not only well-worded, but also visually appealing. It might say something of typical millennial attention spans (sarcasm) but I like a paper with pictures. I wanted the numbers to speak for themselves and stand out, rather than be lost in my long paragraphs.

The medium I'm talking about in the first place is media—which is inherently visual. I wanted the option and opportunity to embed the media I was discussing. Initially there were talks of including social media posts since that has become so integral to the gatekeeping and hate

campaigns like #Gamergate that I was examining. In the end, I kept my focus on things I had personally created—my graphics and my arguments—because this is my creation, my thesis.

I'm very proud of this project, in spite of all the killing of darling discourse that went about in the editing process. I think what I argue here speaks to the work I did while at Ball State, a fitting culmination of working with women in a major that is overwhelmingly male during a time when the film industry many of us aspire to be in is having a significantly feminist movement against a long held tradition of sexual assault and harassment.

While this thesis, like my podcast, criticizes geeky industries and publications, it also hopes and believes in a more inclusive future because of growing fanbases, the mainstreaming of the aforementioned geeky media, and more diverse characters being created by a diversifying industry. Progress may be slow in some aspects, but there is progress nonetheless.

Spark Link – Creative Project

<https://spark.adobe.com/page/bUfbxzKacBJsp/>

The Vicious Cycle: geek identity politics

The geek identity has become increasingly ill-defined as comic books, video games, and formerly niche Internet cultures become mainstreamed. Women and men play video games in approximately equal numbers (Paaßen 2016), movies based in comic book lore easily become blockbusters (“Marvel Comics”), and obsessing over television shows has become the expectation, rather than the exception. With high fantasy series such as *Game of Thrones* commanding a global audience (Dockterman 2016), video game sales being higher than ever (Orland 2018), and Marvel releasing films to record-breaking audiences, it would not be a stretch to then assume that everyone is a little bit of a geek now.

And yet despite all this, the stereotypical depiction of the “geek” identity has remained largely unchanged since it’s inception. Gamers in particular are depicted in media and in the public mindset as young men, consumed by their screens, residing somewhere in their mother’s basements (Paaßen 2016). Not only is this a generally unkind depiction, but it is also an inaccurate one. Women play games in equal numbers and are just as likely to view the latest superhero film. African Americans and Hispanic people play video games in larger numbers than white men, and yet white men are viewed as the default identity of “gamer” (Williams 2008).

Previously, this representation would not be problematic, but as geeky pursuits are mainstreamed, backlash from those who have claimed the geek identity has had wide-reaching consequences that effect not only those in geek communities, but in the industry as well.

I argue here that the stagnation of the geek identity is due in part of white, male gatekeeping tactics which contribute to the vicious cycle of women being unable to access the geeky community, their then being excluded from the industry, and thus the lack of female

character representation in geeky media which makes women and girls all the less likely to pursue careers in said media.

The geek identity is more nebulous than white and male, but the definition of nerd has been historically advertised as such.

What is the geek identity?

Geek and nerd for the purpose of this paper are used interchangeably, because their definitions are largely based around the idea of someone of an intellectual nature pursuing an activity with enthusiasm. Additionally, these people are often socially inept as a result of their passions. While this description could easily apply to anyone, in popular vernacular it has become inherently gendered. Geeks, nerds, and notably gamers are male in the popularized mindset. Geeky things such as video games are then male-oriented activities, the design and marketing of which often support said claim.

But how did geekery—enthusiasm for comics, video games, and certain series and film become male? In the beginning, video games were traditionally marketed indiscriminately to girls and boys (Kent 2001). In fact, families were often a target of early commercials featuring the first consoles Atari and other early gaming companies put out. Father, brother, sister, and mother were all involved with playing *Pong* and its various knockoffs. The vast majority of programmers in the start of gaming were men, but that doesn't mean that women were entirely absent. Carol Shaw was the first female developer hired by Atari, and she recalled that at the time, games were not marketed at a specific gender or age—they were just meant to be fun (Lien 2013).

It was after the video game crash of 1983 due to an oversaturated console market, dud games produced in unsellable numbers, and competition from home computers that led the shift from games being as we might know them today, a form of entertainment to be enjoyed by anyone, to a medium marketed as a toy. Nintendo is viewed as the leader in this movement, strategically placing the new Nintendo Entertainment System in the toy aisle, complete with the NES Zapper and R.O.B. (Robotic Operating Body). After the success of the NES after the failure of indiscriminately marketed games before that led to the careful study of just who was buying games (Kent 2001).

The 1990's has no shortage of ads that specifically cater to the demographic discovered to be buying the most video games—young boys. Thus the industry doubled down. Ads weren't only being made to appeal to boys, the games themselves were also being made with this narrowed demographic in mind. These ads that steadily started to sexualize women as their young, male audience matured began to create the perception that video games weren't for women. Women and girls had always played video games, but because they weren't the majority of players, the industry prioritized their male audience (Lien 2013).

Beginning in 2006, it appeared the market was self-correcting the standard for game consoles being male playthings. The Wii went back to gaming's roots and was marketed as a family device, featuring ads that showed the parents, and even the grandparents getting just as enamored with Wii games as the kids (LeClaire 2006). Nintendo saw the oversaturation of games being marketed toward the specific audience of young men. It couldn't compete with the considerably "edgier" brands associated with Xbox and Playstation. Rather than attempting to develop another gritty, first person shooter—the genre Xbox and Playstation were finding huge success with—Nintendo made commercials featuring young, female celebrities playing games

like *Nintendogs* and *Brain Age*. Using the Blue Ocean Strategy, Nintendo opened gaming up to an entirely new demographic, one that had always been there, but had just been visibly ignored.

And yet, these women playing the games were not gamers. They specifically said so in a series of commercials for Nintendo's later 3DS (Rigney 2012). These commercials featured actresses and gold-medalists saying they were not gamers, but with their 3DSs, they were coin-collecting champions or artists, according to the respective games they were playing.

This is just one notable example of how women, despite playing games, often refuse the title of "gamer." The gaming community and market around gaming has very specific connotations that women often hesitate or feel they cannot identify with. I argue that this is centered around the male-coding of the term "gamer" and how mainstreamed games, which are often games women first experience because of their gender-neutral marketing, are invalidated as being "real" video games. They're casual, not hardcore, and thus the women who play them are not "true" gamers.

Men are also more apt to self-identify as nerds than women (Paaßen 2016). The nerd-identity has already been historically associated with the male gender, and not always in the most positive of ways. Women may hesitate to define themselves via a male-coded identifier, because there's a significant conflict between gender identity and that social identity. Gamer identity is increasingly something performed outside of gaming itself. Merchandise, conventions, and online forums are all a part of the identity (Grooten and Kowert 2015). There are certainly factors within the community that creates a hesitation within women wishing to join it that will be later discussed, but one core issue is that the stereotypes created around gaming have led to women who game underestimating their own commitment and skill when it comes to gaming.

On average, women underestimate their weekly gameplay times by three hours (Williams 2008). Similarly, studies have shown that women spend less time playing games, and statistically have less leisure time to do so.

Is time commitment a factor of the gamer identity? How is being a gamer defined?

Within the community, there seems to be a clear distinction between what is and what is not a “true gamer” and yet those requirements are not clearly defined. Skill is often one condition indicated as essential to the gamer identity. Despite having less time to game, in a 2015 study of 18,000 *League of Legend* players, it was found that women accrued skill at the same rate as men, but as previously found, had on average less playtime (Ratan 2015). Thus the suggestion is that if women had the same amount of leisure time to play the same number matches that men were able to, then their skill levels would match.

If skill is a determining factor in defining the true gamer, then true gamers are found in the hardcore gaming community. Typically, first person shooters, massive multi-players (MMOs,) and multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) are in the realm of hardcore gaming. These games are distinct from other, perhaps more narratively driven games for required time commitment, complicated interfaces, and competitive scenes. While gaming has become increasingly accessible, top players have also become more visible due to the aforementioned competitive scene associated with hardcore gaming. While high scores might be reserved for the speed-running scene, the general skill and strategy hardcore gaming requires is on display in esports. The League of Legends 2017 World Championship peaked with 106 million viewers and 4 million dollar prize pool for the winning team (“2017 World Championship detailed stats”). For the esports community, these teams and their players become household names, their skill unquestioned.

Casual gaming has no dedicated league, no specific forums or conventions, because casual gaming is so nebulous that I argue it does not exist. Gaming, despite the arguments otherwise, is just gaming. Additionally, there's no standardized way to measure skill in games heavily focused on story or gameplay experience. How does the difficulty of a boss in *Undertale* compare to a Divine Beast in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*? There is no direct way to compare these two "casual gaming" experiences. There's an ever-expanding library of numerous genres that appeal to many demographics, many of which do not test skill whatsoever.

The stereotype of predominantly male gamers only works on the assumption that gaming excludes casual games, wherein popular narrative games sit. These games appeal to women because of the lack of required time commitment and perhaps because there is not a specific image of what a player of a casual game like *Super Mario Odyssey* looks like. For games like *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*, the most visible players are male. Few if any women are featured on teams, and all-women's leagues have been a touchy, controversial subject within the associated communities. If there are all-female teams, then their presence is considered either as a gimmick or "cheap marketing trick" as with what happened with Team Out of the Blue with consisted of five female *League of Legend* players (Anastaspoulos 2017). Professionals in esports have noted that the misogyny associated within the community likely discourages more participation from female players, leading to a lack of women visible within these communities ("Where are all the women in eSports?").

Women are less likely to play cooperative games with voice chat on, because of associated stigma and the notoriously toxic environment associated especially in games like *League* (Lenhart 2015). In turn, women within technology fields associate more with their career than their gender (Prescott and Bogg 2013). The most visible representation of gamers,

especially “hardcore gamers” are young men, and women struggle to find themselves represented within hardcore gaming despite making up almost a third of players (Paaßen 2016). I associate this with the environment created within the gaming community that protects the outdated stereotype that gamers are primarily white males. Women cannot find themselves within the industry or professional gaming or within games themselves when they are being invalidated and rejected from the consumption of games.

Gaming is not a meritocracy. The plethora of games available and the myriad ways of playing them—some with no real goal other than enjoyment—cannot support this theory. Rather, I argue that the community’s policing of the definition of “true gaming” and their reverence of hardcore gaming as “true gaming” is just another gatekeeping strategy which preserves the stereotype of gamers being male. Because esports scenes are overwhelmingly male and on significantly visible platforms (even being considered for future Olympics, a stage that would have a larger global audience than it already has) they support the image that gamers are male. Esports has a female audience, and a female player base, but those who become visible as playing the game on platforms such as Twitch are criticized and policed on a larger scale than male players. Those who become visible are invalidated as truly being a part of the community because of their being “boob streamers” or just attempting to dupe young, male viewers into donating by invading the spaces where they play (Grayson 2015).

There is an overall hesitance to welcome women into hardcore gaming, but even casual gaming has been weaponized against them. Casual gaming, unlike those games within esports scenes, is not considered “true gaming” because of a perceived lack of skill or effort. Thus mobile games, which have a significantly female playership (“A Majority of US Female Mobile Gamers Play Daily”), are not real games to begin with, so those who play them are not gamers. If

they are then they are “filthy casuals,” a term leveled at the mainstreaming of gaming that has recently been ironically appropriated.

The concept of the geek identity being based around skill in gaming, however, would hugely narrow the identity down into a single demographic. This doesn’t factor in role playing games, strategy games, cosplay, comics, and the general consumption of trivia so typically attributed to the geek identity. Hardcore gaming alongside casual gaming has also become increasingly mainstream, reflecting the overall acceptance of what was once considered fringe.

The maintenance of hardcore gaming being male and casual gaming—with its female audience—not being “real” gaming is a gatekeeping tactic used by those claiming the geek identity who feel victimized by the mainstreaming of gaming and geeky pursuits. They were part of the community before it was cool, when ridicule for their passions was hazard of claiming the nerd identity.

The industry, professional scenes, game design, and marketing have all supported the stereotype of the geek identity being white and male, so as the demographic of these communities shift, there’s a sense of invasion into a community that was created for them, and thus a there is a pushback against these perceived invaders. These “true gamers” are especially hostile toward the increasing numbers of women who enter the community. Previously, they felt persecuted and rejected by women, so now that feeling of victimization is weaponized against the women who dare claim the name “geek.”

The Fake Geek Girl

This brings us to the idea of the “fake geek girl.” Popularized by memes in the early 2010’s, the fake geek girl is a girl who fakes familiarity with geek texts such as games, comics, and films (“Idiot Nerd Girl”). She does this as either a bid for attention, an attempt to appear cool with the increasing mainstream of geek media, or less likely, to try to impress self-identified geeky men.

At the time, the meme spread to other formats such as videos entitled “Hot Women Pandering to Nerds” which featured a supercut of various actresses being asked about superheroes, comics, and *Star Wars* on late night television interviews. The use of the word “pandering” suggests that their enjoyment of the media is faked for the sake of attention. The comment sections on videos like this argue that further interrogation into their claim would reveal their ignorance to the cultural canon behind the game, movie, or comic.

Eventually, the original “Idiot Nerd Girl” macro image meme was re-appropriated in order to highlight the reactionary nature often associated with geek audiences (Edidin 2012). Captions like “Enthusiastically explores new media and related subculture; driven away by territorial assholes” captures the particular brand of gatekeeping associated with geek subcultures.

In this instance, gatekeeping is the practice of limiting those who have access to a media or the associated fandom by creating barriers. Those barriers can either be generalized hostility and superiority, a shifting standard of familiarity with the subject, or other “requirements” of knowledge or skill before access to the title of “true nerd” is granted. As previously stated, however, there is no one, agreed upon definition of “true nerd” and therefore the goal is ever-changing, so that even if the imagined conditions are met, claims to nerdism can easily be refuted. Which is oftentimes what happens when women enter the subculture.

Gatekeeping within geek cultures are often policed and justified through a—again nonstandard and continuously evolving—cultural canon, the familiarity and consumption of which serves as cultural credentials. One is not a “true nerd” unless they’ve played certain games, watched certain movies, or are familiar with in-jokes with the fandoms. Outsiders reveal themselves through their ignorance to these titles. The YouTube comments on “Hot Women Pander to Nerds” detailed game mechanics and references commenters were convinced Mila Kunis would be unfamiliar with if further questioned about how much she enjoys the game *World of Warcraft*.

The maintenance of the idea of a cultural canon not only excludes the idea of beginners within the medium, but also does not account for the fact that like in academia, it is often created by white males in privilege. Mirroring the history of how literary canon has overwhelmingly represented white, male authors and characters, the same conditions of privilege have created the cultural canon within video games. Female characters and creators have been excluded via the impression that women don’t create or aren’t interested in games, when in reality, the origins of gamer culture were male because of the head start enjoyed by college-educated males who had the privilege to be the first to create games in their engineering programs. From there, the myth further blossomed, continuing the parallel of women and people of color being excluded from culturally important works because of their exclusion from the tools to create said works (Condis 2016). Before, the tools were literacy and education. Today, the tools are a capricious community and an industry influenced by them.

This has led to the cultural canon involving gaming especially being largely made up of properties created by the male progenitors—or those who look like them—of geek media. The George Lucases, Steven Roddenburys, and Gabe Newells are aspirational figures who oftentimes

resemble the audience of their properties. These are people who would be listed in Anorak's Almanac, the "syllabus" of nerdism within the fictional world of Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, wherein knowledge of the cultural canon is tantamount of winning the title of "true nerd."

It should be noted that excluding one artist, the names featured with Anorak's Almanac as important contributions to influencing the future of fictional nerdism are entirely white and male (Condis 2016). *Ready Player One* excludes Japanese contribution to geek culture despite Japanese games, anime, and auteurs like Hideo Kojima and Shigeru Miyamoto making some of the largest impressions on the nebulous, but current cultural canon. While the games are Japanese in creation, *Pokémon* titles, the *Metal Gear* franchise, and *The Legend of Zelda* games still feature ambiguously European-appearing male protagonists upon which white, male gamers can project themselves.

Self-identified geeks view geek material as being created for their demographic: straight, white, cis-gendered, and male. For those outside of that identity, they are either doing so through a straight, white, cis-gendered, male view such as being introduced through male friends or for duplicitous reasons without any true intention of being interested in said media, which is the idea that conjured the bugbear of the fake geek girl.

The unfortunate fact is that there is much evidence to support that geek material is being made with the white male in mind as the primary consumer. This is why video game protagonists are overwhelmingly white and male, while women and people of color are reserved for secondary or tertiary characters that are oftentimes reduced to problematic, harmful stereotypes (Jacobs 2009). Male developers with a male audience in mind produce male protagonists and sexualized, secondary female characters.

According to the International Game Developers Association's 2016 Diversity Report, white men still make up the majority of the industry. This survey also acknowledges that women report diversity as being important 14% more on average than men do, especially in terms of game content. The report notes: "In addition to being underrepresented in the videogame industry, women have long experienced derogatory representations of their gender in videogame content as well as a general invisibility within the wider videogame culture." (IGDA Releases 2014/2015 Diversity Report - International Game Developers Association)

With the glaring presence of overtly sexualized, under-developed female characters, one can see where self-identified geeks would question the motives behind women's embrace of gaming. However, women have always had to consume media that portrays them inaccurately, unkindly, and in erroneous numbers. This has been the nature of Hollywood for decades, but movies are not considered an exclusively male leisure activity. Film continues to produce sexist narratives and characters, but has also been forced to acknowledge the female half of its audience, and thus has become increasingly feminist in recent years. This has been attributed to and conversely contributes to the increase of women's participation in the production of film.

The video game industry can do the same if games feature more women, and thus more women feel welcome to work in an industry that represents them in positive, accurate lights.

But it would not be accurate to point to confusion or suspicion of women's interest as the true motives behind the gatekeeping and policing of the geek identity. In actuality, it is an ironic sense of victimization and marginalization. White men see a threat in the critique of the media made with their viewership in mind and efforts toward inclusivity within said media. Those who promote gatekeeping are often those who feel as if their fandom is being invaded, as

if their identity is being invalidated. This can sometimes lead to violent backlash against the perceived war on nerdism.

#Gamergate and other tantrums

There are very few female game developers, as reflected in the IGDA diversity report. This does not reflect a lack of interest in game development or in games on the part of women, but rather the toxic environment created by the geek community for female game developers. When female game developers or when women within the gaming community on the whole become well-known, it's less likely for their achievements than for violence and harassment that happens to them, online and off. Such are the hazards of being female and visible within the community, which may be just another factor why women turn off voice chat and hesitate to claim the name gamer.

This dark side of the gaming community gained international visibility during the phenomenon known as #Gamergate. While the social movement claimed to seek the exposure of bad ethics in gaming journalism and industry, it instead was a massive harassment campaign against anything perceived as a threat to gaming—criticism, social justice, and chiefly, women. The movement sparked in the summer of 2014 when the spurned ex-boyfriend of indie game developer Zoe Quinn wrote an unsubstantiated manifesto on how she had purportedly traded sexual favors for a positive Kotaku review--that doesn't exist--for her successful game "Depression Quest."

Participants in the targeted abuse that followed justified themselves as seeking to rectify the skewed morals of game journalism, but in actuality #Gamergate was a symptom of a

community rife with toxic masculinity that felt threatened by the increasing mainstreaming of games and the inclusion of people who weren't white and male within the industry, community, and games themselves. Through rape threats, bomb threats, and doxxing the #Gamergate community targeted women and those who came to their defense. Panels in conventions meant to discuss #Gamergate or led by victims of the hate campaign were typically cancelled due to threats of mass shooting or bombings.

In this community tweeting publishing developers' parents' addresses and sending dead animals to said addresses was the ardent belief that social justice warriors were going to ruin gaming. Social justice warriors in this case are defined as people who advocate for the inclusion of more diverse characters, storylines, and creators within the gaming community. They publicly criticize games for sexualized characters, sexist storylines, and the general misrepresentation of women. For #Gamergaters, any indication of a problem within gaming was perceived as an attack on gaming, thus their campaign to forcibly silence those criticizing games gained such a fervor.

Anita Sarkeesian and her crowd-funded Feminist Frequency YouTube series "Tropes vs Women" was one target of the #Gamergate mob. Her videos pointed out problematic tropes within gaming such as the "damsel in distress" and "women as a reward for the protagonist", while also praising positive representation of women in games. In 2018, the comments on these videos are disabled and for good reason—Sarkeesian was harassed with horrific rape threats, her home address doxxed, and her speaking events occupied by hostile detractors. A quick YouTube search of her channel leads to thousands of videos criticizing her, questioning the validity of her arguments, or invalidating the presence of feminism in gaming whatsoever. Sarkeesian wasn't saying anything that hadn't already been argued in academia or online publications before, but

she was doing so on a platform with significant visibility to the gaming community and thus drew the ire of the #Gamergate movement.

The #Gamergate movement supposedly saw feminism as a threat to video games. Somehow, the movement toward more practically-dressed female avatars would lead to the downfall of gaming, which then suggested that the point of gaming was centered around the misogyny and violence that feminist critics brought attention to. Ironically, the violent backlash only served to bring more notoriety to the issues critics like Sarkeesian were discussing. Why were #Gamergaters so determined to silence feminist voices? There was no real evidence supporting a feminist conspiracy controlling gaming. Women are the minority within the industry, and remain the minority within games themselves, triple-A titles like *Red Dead Redemption* and its anticipated sequel featuring only male playable characters (Golding 2016). Games were still being produced with scantily-clad female characters who need rescuing along with titles like *Super Seducer* that teach problematic pick-up techniques (Walker 2018). Why did (and do) #Gamergaters feel like the conversation around gaming is being dominated by women?

Even if women are contributing only a third of the conversation, studies have shown that their part is overestimated—they are perceived by men to be dominating the conversation, despite the men actually speaking the most (Adamczyk 2016). Keeping this in mind, in corroboration with the historic stereotype of the gamer being white and male, #Gamergaters see their identity being appropriated and destroyed by feminist discourse.

What might be more true to the doubling-down of the movement is that due to the violent tactics used by the movement, the public perception of gaming shifted. Showcasing such misogynistic vitriol that was then picked up by mainstream news and even television created a new gamer stereotype, one that was white and male, but also angry and misogynistic.

Discussions around #Gamergate only served to reinforce the belief that gamers who aligned themselves with the movement were persecuted by the mainstream, and notably by women. An episode of *Law & Order: SVU* featured a female game developer being kidnapped by pseudo-#Gamergate terrorists who wanted to keep women out of gaming. This episode, being not entirely well-researched, served to communicate that gamers were being demonized by mainstream media, gaming journalism even (Maiberg 2015). Additionally, it confirmed that #Gamergate's violence would be effective when wielded against women in the industry: after her ordeal the Sarkeesian-stand in who was kidnapped says, "Women in gaming? What did I expect? I'm out."

This behavior is less about the content within games creating violence or the idea that gamers cannot separate fantasy from reality, but rather the community and identity around gaming that has been hijacked by an out-of-control masculinity. Much of #Gamergate has been attributed to being a troll campaign: the participants did not actually believe in what they were promoting, but were promoting the abuse for entertainment purposes. Troll in this case will be used to describe those who harass others online for their personal entertainment purposes rather than those ardently supporting the #Gamergate cause because, as Sarkeesian said in an interview with *The Guardian*, "The word 'troll' feels too childish. This is abuse." (Valenti). However, "trolling" might have become a larger part of this new gamer identity. What could be defined as bullying in real life, trolling has become a regular part of the gaming community. Hurling insults, spamming chats, and using racial epithets and other slurs are all fairly normalized within the gaming community, along with a kind of casual misogyny that speaks to the assumed exclusion of women within the community. A 2006 study found that female-appearing usernames

experience 25 times more harassment on average than male-coded ones (Study: Female-Name Chat Users Get 25 Times More Malicious Messages).

Whether or not #Gamergate was just another game to those engaging with the movement, it had real life consequences. Notably, such violent discourse creates a chilling effect on conversation about feminism's place in gaming and geekdom as a whole. Further study could be looked exactly how the hyper-masculinization of this community has effected the interest of women within it, and if the gaming industry has really been swayed by #Gamergate. The pervasiveness of online harassment is gaining recognition in offline and legal spheres, but there continues to be a frustrating lack of resources for those facing online abuse. Oftentimes the advice is to unplug or leave an online community. This is the apparent hope of those who ardently defend the identity of gamer as white and male from the mainstreaming of their interests. By creating a toxic environment, the #Gamergate community has reinforced the stereotype of the geek identity being male and that the nerd identity defines itself via the rejection and separation of itself from others.

Conclusion

Women are unable to enter the community, and then are unable to function in the industry because of the community, and then are unable to be visible female figures or create visible female figures to break the stereotype of the community, and thus the geek identity, of being white and male. At each phase, women are warded off by a stereotype lashing out in it's death throes. The geek identity is no longer fringe, white, or male—it can be anyone, and when everyone is a nerd, then no one is a nerd. This is what has led to the hostile, and toxically

masculine community within gaming and other nerdy pursuits. In the preservation of an identity, the community has created a new one for itself: the angry misogynist.

However, movements like #Gamergate have not halted the progress of the geek identity's shift. Certainly, the blockbuster success of diverse films like Marvel's *Black Panther* which quickly became the highest grossing superhero film to date proves that geeky media has a wider audience than white men (Pallotta 2018). Within the industry, cartoons written by women like *Steven Universe* and films directed by women like *Wonder Woman* have found bombastic success that goes against the idea that women are uninterested in nerdy genres. With increased visibility of female gamers, more games are being created with this diverse audience in mind. Post-#Gamergate, when people spoke out against a sexualized pose on a character from the hugely popular game *Overwatch*, developers listened and amended the pose to suit its audience (McWhertor 2016). Nerdy audiences are no longer white men living in their mothers' basements, nor are they the angry trolls hurling death threats around, and nor are they the narrow demographic of the professional esports scene.

The geek identity is now a much broader demographic that goes to movies, watches television, plays video games, and surfs the internet; which is to say that anyone can claim the nerd identity. Whether or not the industry has definitively accepted this or that those within certain hyper-masculine parts of the community will ever recognize this could be left for further research.

If gatekeeping tactics like harassment are dismantled, then women feeling more welcome and later finding their place within the industry will only further lead to more visible female characters and role models that will assure women that they have a place within the geek identity. The vicious cycle can be broken.

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The Vicious Cycle

Geek Identity Politics

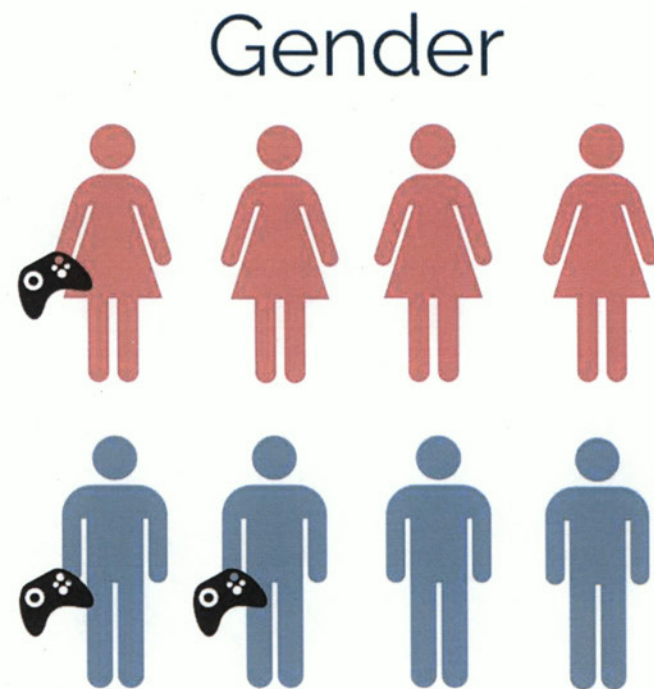
lack of access to the community

lack of female professionals

lack of female characters



Men are twice as likely to identify as gamers than women who play video games just as much.



Source: Pew Research Center

fewer than 1,000 games feature a female protagonist



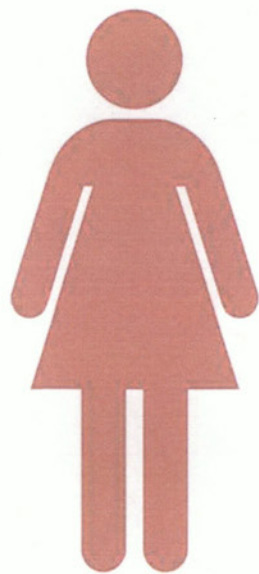
75%

of game developers are male

67%

of game developers are white

Source: IGDA DeveloperSatisfaction Survey 2014-2015 - Diversity Report



Women are twice as likely to be sexually harassed online



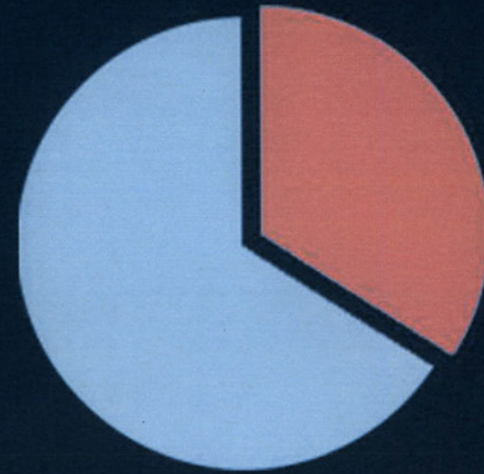
Women are three times as likely to be stalked online



Female-coded usernames are 25 times more likely to receive harassment

Source: Pew Research Center; University of Maryland

718%
pay gap between
male and female
esports professionals



women make up a third
of esports viewership

Source: Bleeding Cool

48%

of gamers are
female



52%

of gamers are
male

The Vicious Cycle

Geek Identity Politics



Source: Pew Research Center

fewer than 1,000 games feature a female protagonist



75%

of game developers are male

67%

of game developers are white

Source: IGDA Casual/Satisfaction Survey 2014-2015 - Diversity Report



Source: Pew Research Center; University of Maryland

718%
pay gap between
male and female
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women make up a third
of esports viewership

Source: Bleeding Cool



Break the cycle

1. Create a welcoming community
2. Diversify the industry
3. Allow for diverse characters

